

Remembering Charles Glatfelter

Charles Glatfelter was a man of steady habits and abiding attachments. No personal attachment, of course, exceeded his feelings for Miriam and their children, Philip and Christina. When you think of individuals, places, and institutions that mattered deeply to him over time you must include his home town of Glen Rock and his home county of York; Gettysburg College where his connection commenced in 1941 and continued for the remainder of his life, Christ Lutheran Church, where he taught Sunday school and served on various history-related committees; colleagues with whom he collaborated on historical research, among them Robert Fortenbaugh, Robert Bloom, Fred Weiser, Bradley Hoch and Arthur Weaner; the Adams County Historical Society, which he served as director for more than four decades and another decade as historian in residence; and the Caspar Glatfelter Association, which he served in many capacities over seven decades. To this list you might add his relations with legions of former students at the college and his loyalty to the Democratic Party, from the first ballot he cast in 1945 to his final one this past presidential election.

Charlie was born in a small but lively village in a beautiful corner of York County six months before Calvin Coolidge was elected to his only full term as president of the United States. The year was 1924. As a long time observer of presidents and presidential politics, Charlie could tell you all you ever wanted to know about Coolidge's personality, political life, and policies in the White House. He

could cite the exact date that Coolidge became president, and the date that Coolidge announced to the Washington press corps that “I do not choose to run” for re-election in 1928.” Charlie knew that history was much more than an assemblage of facts, but he also believed to the core that facts were the stuff that historians were obliged to work with. From age eight to age eight-eight, he reveled in collecting them. It’s worth adding that “Silent Cal” Coolidge was interesting to Charlie, but hardly his favorite president. That honor has to go to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. You might find this odd somehow given the part of the country he grew up in, but it is true. It’s only fair to add that Charlie also admired Gettysburg’s contribution to the presidency, Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Charlie is best known to scholarly peers as a student not of politics but of local, family, and church history. As a historian his range geographically was something akin to William Faulkner’s “postage stamp” of turf in Mississippi, Yoknapatawpha County, that served as the basis for some of the greatest novels an American has produced. Charlie did not write novels, of course. He did not even read them, to the best of my knowledge, beyond two American classics, Henry Adams’s Democracy and Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle. But Charlie knew Adams and York Counties as no one before him ever had and no one since ever will. He touched more documents, made more sense of the documentation of York and Adams Counties, and wrote more useful memos and articles about those documents than anyone else ever did or likely ever will.

Charlie’s research and publications in local and church history were the products of diligent and exacting research, which is one reason why they will

remain valuable into the indefinite future. Into his late eighties Charlie loved the chase, the joy of discovering new information and telling new stories about York and Adams County history. His most recent pursuits required the kind of serious detective work that he thrived on. In one instance he solved a mystery about the shooting of a Union courier at the Battle of Gettysburg by a Fairfield man. In another, he was able to debunk the notion that the first manufacture of ice cream in the United States occurred in his home-town of Glen Rock. I can't say that Charlie wanted to delegitimize the marker that was going to be placed in Glen Rock highlighting this factoid. After all, he started in the world of work as an ice cream scooper in his family's country store in that village. And Charlie absolutely loved Glen Rock. But Charlie was always vigilant about getting things right. Hence if the facts tilted against Glen Rock, so be it.

This is not the place to recount all the incidents of a long and well-lived life. It is more important to try and take the measure of this man who made such a deep impress on the institutions that he cared about, and who had a remarkably wide range of admirers. When I stand back from that life a few words come immediately to mind: sheer smarts; self-control; modesty; stubbornness; curiosity; and integrity.

Each of you here today has a distinctive connection to Charles Glatfelter. Your recollections of him will doubtless accent one piece of the Glatfelter character over another. But I think all will agree that Charlie took what was best in the community of his youth and sustained it through his long life. Colleagues admired him at Gettysburg College because he never promoted himself, much less asked for special duties. However, when asked to perform a task, whether producing the first college

catalog in 1960, chairing a major committee, as he did multiple times, or writing the college's history in the 1980s, he did not shirk from the task – and invariably, he did it in a way that satisfied those who asked him to take it on.

One thing most of you will remember about Charlie is how deliberate he was in his expression of views. If you asked for his opinion on a weighty matter, Charlie would invariably pause, waiting two or three beats more than you or I might. Then he would speak (in perfect paragraphs, I might add) in a way that provided valuable perspective on the options available to the inquirer and the potential consequences of following one or another path.

Nothing gave Charlie more satisfaction than answering a question or solving a puzzle that someone put to him. In one of our final conversations this past November, he told me about a day, just weeks prior, when he had stopped in at the Historical Society and a visitor from another state had posed a question to the staff that no one was able to answer. Charlie took the question and began his patient process of following the available evidence. He found the answer he was looking for, thereby gratifying perhaps the thousandth—or might it be five thousandth—earnest inquirer into local and family history.

Since I have mentioned this incident I must say a word about Charlie and the Adams County Historical Society. Aside from his family, I think it fair to say that the Society was his true love. Charlie enjoyed virtually everything about his work at the Society, except perhaps fund-raising. One might think that when he retired formally as director some of the spark would have gone from him, but in fact, key to the Schmucker building in hand, he felt liberated to do the work he most enjoyed.

Moreover, Charlie developed warm relationships with volunteers there and his immediate successors as Directors of the Society, Russell Swody and Wayne Motts. Wayne took special pains to ensure that Charlie was informed of key issues at the Society, chauffeured Charlie to many a meeting, and over time became not just his protégé but a valued friend.

When I was wearing a younger man's clothes I used to wonder why Charlie seemed straight-on businesslike in teaching and other work at the college, but positively upbeat and sometimes exuberant working at Schmucker Hall, where he spent increasing time in the final years of his active teaching career, and then practically full-time between 1989 and his retirement as director. The answer came to me in an oral history I conducted a few years ago. When I asked Charlie what the Adams County Historical Society meant to him, he replied, "it's my laboratory." And just as his friends in the natural sciences found their homes in their labs, so Charlie found his home in the "laboratory" on Seminary Ridge, a lab with material that could occupy him happily and usefully had he lived to be 100 or 150.

Charlie didn't have that opportunity, but he certainly made the most of the time he had with us. Stern taskmaster as a teacher and mentor, inexhaustible researcher, prolific scholar on religious or educational history, colleague, friend, family member—in these guises he came across as a rock of rectitude and, as you came to know him, a passionate man with a love for pungent Pennsylvania German expressions that could capture a moment or provide a moral to any story he was telling.

The moral attached to Charlie Glatfelter's personal story is for you to draw. I have little doubt it's connected to a lesson or two to live by.

Michael Birkner

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